

Atari: playing David to the giants

by Stephen K. Doig

Gads! There, right in the front of the classroom! Why, it's an Atari! Isn't that the company that makes all those gadgets with the beeps and bongs, the quarter-gobbling video villains who have turned a generation of kids into glassy-eyed, arcade loitering Missile Commanders and Asteroids Blasters? What in the buttoned-down world of education is Atari doing in the classroom?

Well, just about everything, it seems.

Atari may not have been born in a Cupertino, Ca., garage—the electronic age's equivalent of a stable in Bethlehem—but Atari's growth from a builder of simple tv games into a state-of-the-art microcomputer manufacturer has been every bit as spectacular as Apple's. And, just like Apple and Radio Shack, still the giants of the home and school computer industry, Atari has high hopes for a big share of the education market.

Even in an industry less than a decade old, Atari is a newcomer. The company began in 1972 with its founder, Nolan Bushnell's invention of PONG, the first widely popular video game. Though the graphics were low-resolution and the screen was merely black and white, soon no neighborhood bar or pinball parlor in America was considered fully equipped without PONG for its patrons. By 1976, when Atari began marketing a home version of PONG, the company not only was coming out with new coin-operated games but was working on its sophisticated Atari VCS Home Video Arcade System as well.

It wasn't until 1979 that Atari, flushed with its successes in the arcades and on the home televisions, made its great leap forward into the microcomputer market. Initially, Atari's envied reputation as a top-quality video games maker proved to be a liability. Potential computer customers had trouble thinking that the Atari 400 and 800 models were anything but up scale toys.

Those days are over, says Chris Bowman, Atari's 40-year-old national manager of educational sales. Educators are beginning to look at Atari as a competitive choice along with Apple and Radio Shack.

"We're getting over that 'toy' thing," Bowman says. A year ago that was a problem. Now we're trying to show the public that not only do we do games well, but that we do the other things well, also."

Bowman, citing company policy, declines to disclose sales figures. He readily admits, however, that in education sales Atari is well behind—so far, at least,—the big two.

"We don't yet have a major market share," Bowman says. "But in terms of current sales, I'm very happy."

The breakthrough, says Bowman, came last year when the Minnesota Educational Computer Consortium (MECC) weighed all the bids and approved Atari.

"The MECC contract gave us high visibility in education," Bowman says. "Over the last six months now, we've developed rapidly in school sales." Last spring, Atari got another boost when the Dade County, Fl., school system, one of the largest in the country, selected Atari.

The MECC contract also has helped Bowman begin to overcome Atari's most formidable hurdle into competing in the education market: software.

"Until MECC, one of my biggest problems was the lack of high-quality educational software," Bowman says. "But the good thing for us, in addition to the high recognition, was the fact that MECC has about 100 programs they have written for the Apple. Now they have converted those programs to the Atari."

The problem for computer hardware manufacturers in breaking into the education market, Bowman says, is that software (or "courseware") is everything to educators.

"Schools are saying don't confuse us with RAM and ROM, just tell us what it can do," Bowman says. "They're writing their bid specifications around software."

But the big educational publishers, says Bowman, understandably were cautious about pouring in money

to develop Atari-compatible software until they saw that Atari would have enough customers to make the investment pay off.

"They were looking for the sales numbers," Bowman says. "Basically, publishers are fairly conservative."

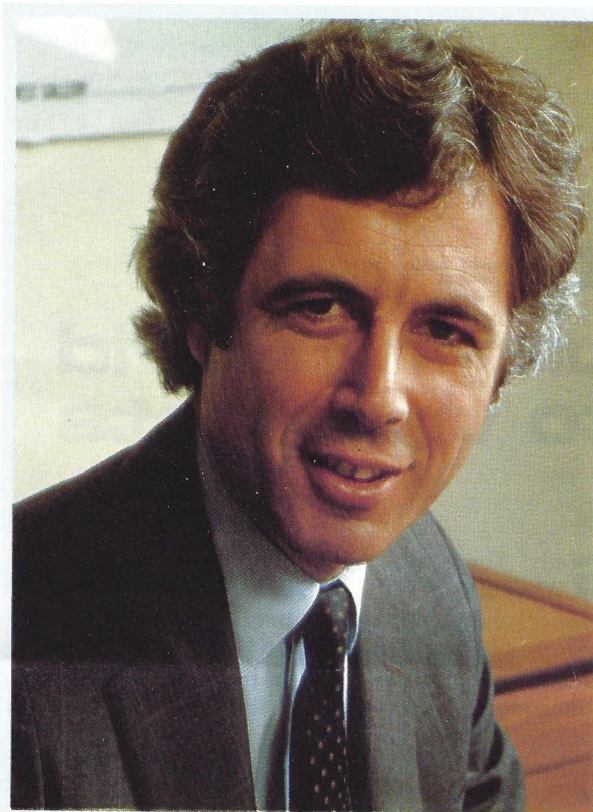
It has the overtones of a classic vicious circle. But the circle finally has broken, Bowman believes.

"Every bid we get," says Bowman, "more and more publishers get interested in developing software for us."

Once Atari got its toehold, Bowman says, both educators and publishers began to see advantages in Atari's hardware design. The key difference between Atari's two computers and the other principal education computers—with the exception of Texas Instrument's 99/4—is Atari's use of plug-in ROM program modules, similar to those used for Atari's home video games. With a simple change of modules, for instance, a user in seconds can switch languages or programs.

Better yet, from the publishers' point of view, courseware on ROM modules is difficult to pirate. And the modules can take the kind of inadvertent classroom abuse that would send disk-stored programs into electrostatic shock.

"The publishers like the module because it's virtually indestructible and isn't copyable," says Bowman.



Bowman speaks with the fervor of the true believer when he is asked what Atari computers have to offer educators.

"Atari is very user-friendly," he argues. "And they're great for the classroom because they're almost indestructible."

The Atari 400, the "plain vanilla" version, uses a plastic touch-sensitive keyboard from which a damp cloth can wipe up peanut-butter-sticky fingerprints. The 800 uses a full size typewriter-style keyboard that Bowman claims is superior to the competition's models in ease of operation.

Bowman also points out that Atari, unlike Apple and Radio Shack and IBM and other big-name micro-computer manufacturers, presently has no intention to spend its energy fighting for a share of the business computer market.

"We've decided to do what we can do best," Bowman explains. "We feel a strong connection between the home and education markets, and that's what we're going after. We can concentrate on a narrow segment and do it well."

Bowman is enthusiastic about the future of computer-assisted instruction.

"What I would like to see happen is to use some of the excitement of Atari games with educational programs," Bowman says. "For instance, the video-disk-microcomputer interface is still untapped. And then there's voice recognition."

What he doesn't want to see, Bowman says, is the computer being used simply as "an electronic page-turner."

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The key to computer literacy for teachers, is giving them a chance to try out the machine's capabilities without making them feel that they'll have to pass a pop quiz on its intricacies.

"The direction to go," says Bowman, "is having the child making the computer do what he wants it to do, rather than the other way around."

To that end, Bowman says, Atari has come out with its own plug-in version of Pilot, the easy-for-kids programming language that uses "turtle" graphics for spectacular effects. And Bowman said the company is developing a Pascal language on disks for more experienced programmers.

Bowman's enthusiasm for the field is that of a convert: it was only three years ago that he saw his first microcomputer.

Bowman had done his graduate work on instructional technology, and had been the director of the Harvard Graduate School of Education's media division. In 1979, he went to a conference in Utah, watched a microcomputer demonstration, and got a glimpse of the future. Soon after, he joined Radio Shack as a regional educational sales manager, and then jumped to Atari last fall when he was offered the position as head of educational marketing.

Bowman's love-at-first-byte affair with educational computing isn't typical of those his age, he suggests. He's particularly aware of the electronic generation gap that yawns in front of experienced teachers with their first hands-on exposure to a microcomputer.

"The built-in response is fear," Bowman says. "I think most of us grew up in an era when a computer was rows of machinery in an enormous room marked 'Authorized Persons Only.'"

The key to computer literacy for teachers, Bowman says, is giving them a chance to try out the machine's capabilities without making them feel that they'll have to pass a pop quiz on its intricacies.

"If you put a teacher in a non-threatening environment where he or she won't be embarrassed," Bowman says, "once they sit down, they're hooked."

Naturally, the company does all it can to get as many new addicts as possible. Along with attending the usual round of educational products shows, Atari is trying other marketing innovations. For instance, the company has outfitted a Dodge van with 18 Atari 800s, complete with disk drives and printers, to do demonstrations in California schools. The Atari Computer Van has been so well-received—it's now booked a year in advance, says Bowman—that Atari is considering using similar vans in other parts of the country.

There has to be a marriage of educators and computer experts. Today, most computer experts don't understand education, and most educators don't understand computers. And too much of the available educational software shows the conceptual failings of both sides.

And, says Bowman, it's those grade-schoolers who are now getting their first taste of computing that ultimately will open educational computing, and particularly educational software, to its fullest potential.

"There has to be a marriage of educators and computer experts," Bowman says. Today, he claims, most computer experts don't understand education, and most educators don't understand computers. And too much of the available educational software shows the conceptual failings of both sides.

But just wait, says Bowman, until the growing generation of computer-literate children grows up.

"Some will go into computing," says Bowman. "But others will go into teaching, for instance, with an insight into how computers can really be used." **EE**



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